improving low-performing schools: policy implications from research

TRANSFORMATION

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See "Context Matters," p. 7, for a special message about the research featured in this issue.

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P.O. Box 1348
Charleston, WV 25325-1348
800-624-9120
aelinfo@ael.org
www.ael.org

Evidence-Based Advice For improving schools

A new research synthesis from AEL, the publisher of *TransFormation*, reports on what works with low-performing schools.

Schools that succeed despite adverse conditions share (1) a strongly focused instructional program, (2) an emphasis on student achievement, and (3) a culture of collaboration among teaching staff.

Schools can improve student achievement in the short run if they (1) align what is taught with the standards measured by the state's accountability system, (2) align classroom assessments with curriculum and use results to monitor student performance and adjust instruction, (3) analyze student achievement to determine where instructional change and interventions are most needed, (4) develop capacity to monitor instruction and plan changes based on needs, (5) link professional development directly to improvement goals, and (6) provide additional learning time for students who need it.

To *sustain* school improvements, however, schools need to address reform at a deeper, structural level: (1) develop faculty readiness to embrace school change, (2) develop a cohesive vision of reform throughout the school, and (3) foster shared leadership (accountability) within the school.

Policymakers can help set the stage for these improvements:

Provide appropriate pressure. Base accountability on clear and measurable standards that can serve as a framework for improvement efforts.

Provide sufficient support. Provide the support (e.g., professional development, external facilitators, additional resources) necessary to meet site-specific needs.

Foster strong shared leadership. The professional growth of practicing and aspiring educators and school leaders is crucial. The necessity of shared leadership in directing and sustaining improvements must be made explicit in their training.

E-mail Dr. Christopher Corallo at coralloc@ael.org and Dr. Deborah McDonald at mcdonald@ael.org.

Source

Christopher Corallo & Deborah H. McDonald, *What Works with Low-Performing Schools: A Review of Research.* Charleston, WV: AEL, 2002. Available online at www.ael.org/transform/whatworks.pdf.

Dueling Reforms hamper progress in

Report underscores the need for

Source of Research

Mark Berends, Joan Chun, Gina Schuyler, Sue Stockly, R. J. Briggs, *Challenges of Conflicting School Reforms: Effects of New American Schools in a High-Poverty District.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002. RAND has been monitoring the progress of NAS initiatives over the past 10 years. This and other NAS research reports are available at www.rand.org/education/projects/nas.html. This study was conducted by RAND Education and funded by New American Schools, the Ford Foundation, and another donor.

Schools adopting comprehensive school reform models need to consider their fit with other school and district improvement efforts, according to a new book by RAND researchers. While these models have proven effective in some settings, they must be aligned with state systems of standards and assessment if they hope to produce their intended results.

The study examined the effects on classroom conditions and student achievement of the New American Schools comprehensive school reform models adopted in a high-poverty district in San Antonio, Texas. The intent was to better understand comprehensive school reform and its effects on teaching and learning within high-stakes accountability environments. Based on two years of data, findings revealed few differences in teacher perceptions of classroom conditions between schools using the models and those not using them. Nor did the early findings show effects on student achievement.

Initially, the district viewed New American Schools models as a framework to hold multiple initiatives together. Many believed that an external model provider would be more successful at creating and sustaining change than the district alone. But severe barriers to improvement were created by (1) the challenging educational environment that the schools served and (2) the district's response to high-stakes accountability pressures.

To improve student performance on the state test, the district developed a standards-aligned curriculum across grade levels at all schools. At the same time, many schools in the district adopted comprehensive school reform models. Consequently, these schools frequently faced competing demands and reform strategies. Neither the New American Schools design teams nor the district adequately addressed the challenge of integrating the comprehensive reform models with state standards and assessments.

The new curricula adopted by the district included mathematics, reading, and language arts programs that required about four hours of the school day. In some schools adopting New American Schools models, this requirement competed with teachers' ability to fully implement the model. District and state initiatives clearly took priority over activities associated with the reform model.

Both the new curricula and the reform models were accompanied by extensive professional development. For teachers in schools adopting both, this meant two programs—one from the district and one from the model implementation team, with little or no coordination between the two.

The authors state that while the comprehensive reforms started out with purpose, saliency, and district support, their importance was weakened by the district's response to testing pressure. As a result, implementation and support eroded over time. Researchers did, however, report a positive link between principal leadership and student performance, whether schools adopted reform models or not, indicating that leadership is important to achievement in general, and to implementation in particular.

and Policies high-poverty schools

coordination at the district level.

An analysis of the report suggests the following recommendations for policymakers:

Set short-term goals and celebrate incremental improvements in high-poverty schools. The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program and other federal initiatives for school improvement often target high-poverty schools. Yet these are the very places in which teachers have the least time, resources, and enthusiasm for implementing reforms. So that teachers do not become demoralized, provide them with time and support when implementing reforms under difficult conditions. Acknowledge incremental improvements in classroom and school conditions—the precursors to improved student achievement.

Be aware that high-stakes testing may be a two-edged sword in schools attempting reforms. While high-stakes tests can motivate schools to try new strategies to raise student achievement, they may also provide a disincentive to adopting richer, more in-depth curricula. Schools might feel pressured to seek "quick fixes" rather than lasting changes. State and federal policymakers must give careful consideration to the lack of compatibility between state or district responses to high-stakes testing and incentives for schools to adopt comprehensive reform strategies that change curricula and instruction.

Promote high-quality implementation and coherence with other educational policies and reforms. The authors assert that comprehensive school reforms are likely to influence teachers and students to the extent to which they address five dimensions posited by Porter and Clune:*

- *Specificity.* The reform provides detailed materials and ongoing assistance for schools and teachers to help them better understand the reform's components and activities.
- *Power.* Rewards or sanctions are offered for following established guidelines for implementing a reform model.
- *Authority.* The reform is seen as having strong support from respected groups or policymakers, including the teachers implementing it.
- *Consistency or alignment.* Whole-school reform strategies align with a common mission and vision, both within the school and the district.
- *Stability.* The reform is sustained over time in a coherent, consistent manner.

*These dimensions come from the work of Andrew C. Porter, director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, and policy analyst William H. Clune, a senior researcher for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. The authors of the RAND study used them as "a means for thinking critically about the comprehensive school reform being considered and whether the conditions exist for it to succeed."

Dr. Mark Berends, principal investigator, RAND Education, can be reached at berends@rand.org.

Recommended

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform has designated the RAND report as "recommended reading for policymakers."

Challenging Intellectual Work Benefits disadvantaged students

Authentic instruction is no trivial pursuit.

Source of Research

Fred M. Newmann, Anthony S. Bryk, & Jenny K. Nagaoka. *Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001. www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/pdfs/p0a02.pdf

School assignments that are intellectually demanding can help students do better on standardized achievement tests, say the authors of a study on Chicago's school reforms. They found that low- and high-achieving students benefited about equally from assignments that demanded authentic intellectual work rather than repetition and recall.

Many practitioners express concern that intellectually complex instruction might keep disadvantaged and low-achieving students from covering "the basics," resulting in low performance on standardized tests. The Chicago study counters this and reinforces points raised previously by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning in *Prisoners of Time*.*

The study focused on the standardized test performance of students receiving assignments that required more challenging intellectual work (construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school or connection to students' lives).

Researchers collected both "typical" and "challenging" assignments from a large sample of teachers in 19 public schools serving student populations that were slightly more disadvantaged than the overall district population. Targeted subjects were writing and mathematics in grades 3, 6, and 8. Trained raters scored the intellectual quality of teachers' assignments, and analyzed the ratings in relation to student achievement gains on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Illinois Goal Assessment Program.

In classrooms with high-quality assignments, students' learning gains were 20 percent greater than the national average. In contrast, students who received less demanding assignments gained 25 percent *less* than the national average in reading (22 percent less in math).

Further analysis showed little relationship between the quality of teachers' assignments and the racial or socioeconomic compositions of their classrooms. That is, the quality of the assignment seemed to depend more on teachers' approach to instruction than on stereotypical expectations of students' abilities to do challenging work.

Messages for policymakers:

Support professional development that helps teachers construct intellectually demanding assignments to teach basic skills and subject matter. Merely introducing classroom and assessment materials that include more authentic intellectual challenge is not enough. Teachers need support and assistance to integrate more challenging assignments with their instruction on basic skills.

Encourage demonstrations of school structures that support improved teacher and student learning. Schools currently are not set up to accommodate the time needed for the level of professional development required for teachers to increase authentic intellectual challenge in classroom instruction. Support for pilot sites that want to develop and test new schedules or structures is needed.

*Available at www.ed.gov/pubs/PrisonersOfTime/Letter.html

Dr. Fred Newmann can be reached at fnewmann@facstaff.wisc.edu; Dr. Anthony Bryk is at a-bryk@uchicago.edu.

Reduce Risk, Promote Learning: twin strategies for teen success

Education and emotional well-being are interdependent.

Helping teens adjust to middle and junior high and high school is necessary but not sufficient to raise student achievement, according to a paper published in the *Journal of School Psychology*. Schools must also focus on efforts that promote better academic performance. The most powerful reforms, the authors say, modify the school environment to help students adjust and learn. When properly put in place, such reforms promote the highest levels of performance, achievement, and positive social development for all students.

The article presents findings from a series of studies on whole-school change efforts, describing in depth the School Transitional Environment Project (STEP) and High Performance Learning Communities or Project HiPlaces. The STEP initiative helped students adjust to new academic expectations and social environments as they entered middle/junior high or high school. These preventive efforts helped students stay in school longer, reduced drop-out rates, lowered levels of school violence, and promoted greater safety. However, students did not necessarily make gains in academic performance. Project HiPlaces was designed to focus on questions about school-related factors that promote student achievement. These two initiatives allowed investigators to study both what helps students adjust to key life transitions associated with schools and what conditions and policies create and sustain school transformation that leads to higher student achievement.

Twin strategies for policymakers:

Support programs that help students make the transition into secondary schools. The risk of misbehavior and loss of academic focus increases as teens enter secondary schools, which can have high levels of change and disorganization, require an immediate understanding of a complex set of expectations, and present the student with new social demands and contexts.

Support full implementation of reform or intervention strategies. School-related components of change are interrelated; the success of one depends on the implementation of others. The full benefits associated with supporting students in transition may not be apparent until the school-related factors of the reform have been accomplished and their implementation is mature and comprehensive.

Dr. Robert D. Felner is chair of the School of Education, University of Rhode Island. He can be reached at rfelner@uri.edu.

Connections

Students feeling connected within a school is a key to reducing risky behaviors. That was the conclusion reached by Dr. Robert Blum and colleagues when they analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a federally funded survey of 72,000 adolescents in grades 7-12. Blum directs the University of Minnesota's Center for Adolescent Health and Development. Read the report, *Reducing the Risk: Connections that Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth,* at http://allaboutkids.umn.edu/cfahad/Reducing_the_risk.pdf.

Source of Research

Robert D. Felner, Antionette Favazza, Minsuk Shim, Stephen Brand, Kenneth Gu, & Nancy Noonan, Whole School Improvement and Restructuring as Prevention and Promotion: Lessons from STEP and the Project on High Performance Learning Communities, *Journal of School Psychology, 39(2):* 177-202 (2001).

Reform Leaders' perspective

Expand the meaning of district support in school reform.

The arrival of a new superintendent signals a hold-your-breath time for school reformers. A common scenario: new leadership arrives; declares the latest reform efforts unsuccessful; and makes sweeping changes, eliminating with the stroke of a pen years of planning, implementation, and painfully slow progress. Although the details differ and the prudence of each decision can be debated, this troubling pattern points up the need for policymakers to reconsider their definition of "district support" for school reform.

Much has been written about the essential elements of successful school reform: clear vision, strong leadership, buy-in from teachers. "District support" is another, often defined as a sense that the leaders understand the goals of the reform, speak out about its merits, and demonstrate flexibility in accommodating its strategies. It's time to expand this definition. To survive changes in personnel, district support cannot reside in a single individual; it must become structural. One indicator of structural support is a clearly articulated, mutually agreed upon division of rights and responsibilities between district and school.

Take, for example, the problems that sometimes arise when school reform seems to conflict with a district-led emphasis on state standards and assessments. If rights and responsibilities have been clearly defined, schools will understand that it is the district's responsibility to define a curriculum, based on state standards, that reflects what the community wants its students to know and be able to do.

With a strong districtwide curriculum in place, schools can create strategies, methods, and practices best suited to their unique settings. They can challenge model developers to be flexible by taking into account the local context and the school's broader reform agenda. Professional development can be aligned and integrated into the overall reform effort. This kind of school-level autonomy does not threaten or disrupt district accountability, but actually contributes to it.

It's time for district support to move beyond transient enthusiasms and one-person visions. Schools deserve honest conversations with their districts about who is responsible for what. They should not be abandoned to find their own way through the maze of state standards and mandated assessments. Neither should they be told how to do their work. Teacher buy-in, principal leadership, and parent involvement all flourish when schools exercise autonomy within clear boundaries. Strong district support structures will help schools survive the winds of change at the top and stay focused on raising achievement for all students.

Hugh Burkett, project manager for the Comprehensive School Reform program at the U.S. Department of Education, is a former superintendent with 20 years of experience as a principal. He can be reached at Hugh.Burkett@ed.gov.

Fran Walter joined the Comprehensive School Reform program in 2001 after serving as an assistant superintendent for instruction. She can be reached at Fran.Walter@ed.gov.

editor's spotlight

National emphasis on testing should spur, not deter, effective teaching.

The No Child Left Behind legislation, signed in January, requires the testing of all third through eighth graders in both math and reading. As this heightened accountability movement unfolds, the debate about the pros and cons of high-stakes testing is becoming considerably more heated. The research summaries in this issue of *TransFormation* indicate the potential effects—both positive and negative—of an increased national emphasis on testing.

One district's efforts to use comprehensive school reform models in a high-stakes accountability environment comes from our featured study by Mark Berends and associates. To raise scores on the state test, the San Antonio school district simultaneously encouraged schools to adopt New American Schools reform models and developed new, standards-oriented mathematics and language arts curricula. Because the two reform efforts were not aligned or coordinated, they ended up competing with one another. The reform model initiative soon became a secondary concern across the district and was discontinued with the departure of the superintendent several years later.

On a more positive note, Fred Newmann and associates report on their research in Chicago public schools that showed, contrary to the belief of many educators, that engaging students in intellectually challenging assignments (rather than lower-level "drill-and-kill" activities) was associated with improved achievement on the state-mandated test. Seemingly, such assignments prepared students, many of whom were disadvantaged low achievers, for the standardized tests' emphasis on reading and vocabulary.

How will schools and districts respond as accountability pressures and publicity increase? Hugh Burkett and Fran Walter propose an expanded definition of district support for school reform. Christopher Corallo and Deborah McDonald provide many useful suggestions to help low-performing schools realize immediate and sustained gains in student achievement on state tests. In my own work with several school districts, I have seen some of these strategies (e.g., aligning curriculum with standards, linking professional development to faculty needs, providing additional learning time) used with apparent success. But I have also seen the narrowing of focus to "teaching to the test" without regard to quality of teaching or level of learning. As a result, reforms designed to promote higher-order learning (see Berends et al.) or intellectually challenging assignments (see Newmann et al.) can be de-emphasized or abandoned.

TransFormation editor Dr. Steven M. Ross is director of the Center for Research in Educational Policy, The University of Memphis. He can be reached at rosss@ael.org.

Context Matters

The research summaries in this issue are intended to heighten thought and discussion about how to address accountability needs in ways that stimulate rather than deter effective teaching practices. Collectively, the summaries reinforce the idea that low-performing schools can be turned around by well-supported interventions that focus on instruction. Policymakers should keep in mind, however, that such turnarounds require a highly motivated and well-trained staff. Frequently, low-performing schools are characterized by a culture of low expectations and lack of internal accountability. The are disproportionately staffed by inexperienced, underprepared, and uncertified teachers. Unless these issues are addressed, more technically oriented interventions are not likely to produce lasting change.

a must read

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (www.goodschools.gwu.edu) has designated RAND's report *Challenges of Conflicting School Reforms: Effects of New American Schools in a High-Poverty District* as "must-read" research for policymakers.

This study is summarized on pages 2-3, and information on how to access the full report is included there. The editor also recommends *Corrective Action in Low-Performing Schools and School Districts*, a report from SEDL that summarizes formal state plans to improve low-performing schools. Currently, 34 states have such plans in place. Included is a discussion of sanctions such as reconstitution and school/district takeover. The document is available online at www.sedl.org/pubs/policy91/policy91.pdf.

about us

TransFormation is written for a policy audience. It contains interpretive summaries of reports and studies about school transformation, with special attention to research on improving low-performing schools. In selecting studies to be featured, the editor reviews two categories of research: (1) research representing a consensus among researchers, based on scientific study and the analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data, and (2) relatively recent research findings that hold particular promise for improving practice and performance but do not yet represent a consensus of findings across studies.

The editor, Dr. Steven M. Ross, directs research at the Center for Research in Educational Policy at The University of Memphis, where he holds the Lillian and Morris Moss Chair of Excellence in Urban Education. He can be reached at rosss@ael.org.

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Staff:

Editor
Dr. Steven M. Ross

Managing Editor
Pamela B. Lutz

Senior Strategic Relations & Policy Analyst
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